EVOLUTION OF THE CHINESE SHOPHOUSE[1] FAÇADE[2] IN MALAYSIA: MANIFESTATIONS OF A DIASPORIC PEOPLE

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Abstract

The Chinese shophouse, in particular the traditional style of the pre-war period, is a unique residential-business built form common in major towns and cities in Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia. This ubiquitous edifice was originally a built technology and concept of the Chinese immigrants that flocked to the Southern Seas in search for better prospects during the 19th century. The lives of the diasporic Chinese greatly intertwined with the shophouse – from daily living to commercial activities such as trading and business were all conducted within the premise of the shophouse. The shophouse gained importance and started to evolve its façade when the thriving Chinese emerged as wealthy middle-class that ultimately contributed to the economic urbanization and development of major towns in Malaya. Under presiding trends, the plain unadorned shophouse façade transformed into ornate stylistic ornamentations that reflected an eclectic mix of Chinese, European and Malay cultural symbols and motifs. This essay examines the evolution of shophouse typology and façade during the late 19th- and early 20th-century Malaya. The shophouse's evolving façade was a manifestation of the diasporic Chinese immigrant community that not only asserted their culture but celebrated eclecticism and hybridity in a pluralistic Malayan milieu. Employing qualitative research methods mainly utilizing visual materials (photographs) and in-depth interviews, this visual study discusses the cultural significations and symbolisms underneath the shophouse façade ornamentations, particularly the eclectic façade at its peak of evolution. Visual arts concepts such as ornamentation, visual semiotics, iconography and style, as well as cultural concepts like diaspora, eclecticism and hybridity are referred. At present, with modernization and skyscrapers changing the Malaysian urban landscape, many of these shophouses have ceased importance and are now abandoned, defaced or destroyed. This study highlights the present critical scenario of a possible vanishing cultural heritage and recommends for necessary shophouse conservation actions to be taken.

Keywords:

Chinese shophouse, built typology, façade ornamentation, cultural diaspora, cultural heritage.

PREFACE

The purpose of this essay is not an architectural study but a visual analysis— from a visual arts perspective—of the evolution of the Chinese shophouse façade in Malaysia, particularly focusing on the major towns in Malaya during the period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries before the country's independence. This essay posits that the evolving shophouse façade was not only a manifestation of the diasporic Chinese immigrant community in Malaya, but also reflected syncretism of cultures resulting in eclecticism and hybridity in a pluralistic society like Malaya. Illustrations of shophouses extracted from the author's photography fieldwork throughout the Peninsular Malaysia during the research process are referred in this essay. Descriptions of the Chinese shophouse façades as presented in the illustrations would be focused in and discussed more in detail during the conference.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Shophouse

The Chinese shophouse, or simply shophouse, in particular the traditional style of the pre-war period, is a unique residential-business built form common in major towns and cities in Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia. The shophouse is an indicative landmark of any Malayan town since the 19th century. Shophouses—each with a typical elongated floor plan with a narrow frontage of its own—are built side-by-side connected by shared party walls and lined the grid-patterned streets of the 19th century Malayan towns, such as Malacca, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Klang, Seremban, Alor Setar and Muar in the Malay Peninsula (presently Peninsular Malaysia), still exist to this day.

The term 'shophouse', a combination of a 'shop' and a 'house', is simply a multi-purpose building 'combining business areas on the ground floor with residential quarters on the upper floors' (Kohl 172). An importation from China, this ubiquitous edifice was originally a built technology and concept of the Chinese immigrants that flocked to the Southern Seas (or Nanyang) in search for better prospects during the 19th century. These Chinese immigrants brought with them their knowledge and methods of house construction from their towns and villages in Southern China, and adapted to the shophouse form which became the most basic edifice they depended their livelihoods on in a foreign land such as Malaya. The influx of Chinese immigrants to Malaya particularly during the 19th century British colonial period gave rise to the need and necessity of a built form such as that of the shophouse, which became the most practical building of that period and circumstances that made possible 'the combination of high population density and intensity of economic activity in Chinatown areas of Malayan towns' (Kohl 172).

The Chinese Diaspora in Malaya

The period extending from 12th to 20th centuries witnessed the Chinese diaspora[3] and external migration outside China prompted by tumultuous political conditions of rebellions and war, economic hardships, overpopulation, rural instability, and natural catastrophes such as periodic floods, droughts and plagues (Kohl 2). Under deprived conditions, the 'peripheral'[4] southeastern coastal people of China from maritime provinces of Southern China mass migrated southwards the South China Sea to the Nanyang[5] region and landed themselves in parts of the Malay Archipelago[6] during the period between late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kohl 1; Pan 21).

The most significant phase of Chinese presence in Malaya[7] was during the British colonial period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There was a sudden demand in labour following an unexpected outburst of tin mining and later rubber production activities in Malaya, prompted by the rubber boom and advent of the motor car in Europe. Two waves of *sinkehs* (also *sinkhek*, or 'new arrivals'[8])—the first in the 1860s, the second in the 1900s and after—arrived in Malaya as indentured labourers or 'coolies'[9] in search of better prospects and work opportunities. This Chinese influx formed a large percentage of the Chinese population in the Malay Peninsula at that time, encouraging the economic growth and social development of urban towns.

The sinkehs originated mainly from four maritime Southern Chinese provinces, i.e. Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang and Jiangxi.[10] They regarded themselves

as *hua-ch'iao* (or 'overseas Chinese') and are traditionally-rooted in their living and way of life, relied on communal living and association as *kongsi* [11] (or clan), work with kinsmen or clansmen of the same family, surname or village (Kohl 15). Some sinkehs later sought opportunities in trades and businesses which are unique to their places of origin.[12] They established themselves as successful *towkays* ('businessmen') of small or medium scale trades, some even appointed as *Kapitans*[13].

John Clammer states 'diasporas carry with them their own internal narratives of origins, displacement, return, nostalgia, memory and rootedness' (Clammer 23). The Chinese did not fully detach themselves from their roots but asserted as much as they could their maternal Chinese culture wherever they landed and settled in. Their traditionally-rooted 'Chinese-ness' is seen in many aspects of their lives, ranging from customary practices to ways of living and objects they use. The Chinese built forms, apart from temples and houses, the shophouse, in particular, became an avenue for them to express and assert their 'Chinese-ness' commonly via its façade. While staying true to their maternal culture, the Chinese had to allow some degree of assimilation with local cultures under localised conditions. For example the Chinese constructed their built forms (including the shophouse) using local raw materials such as *atap*[14] (or thatch) and timber readily available and abundant in Malaya. This adaptation signified a break away from the original Chinese culture but witnessed an early form of cultural assimilation of the early diasporic Chinese in a localized environment. The Chinese shophouse façade retained its appearance similarly to their homeland and continued adhering to cultural practices, such as *feng shui*[15] (Chinese geomancy) and symbolic representations of Chinese folk beliefs and myths, meanwhile interacting and assimilating with the prevailing foreign (European) and local (Malay) influences in Malaya, resulting in a new hybrid form of expression. This could be witnessed in the later phases of the eclectic shophouse façade popular in the early 20th-century Malaya.

Shophouse's Function and Purpose

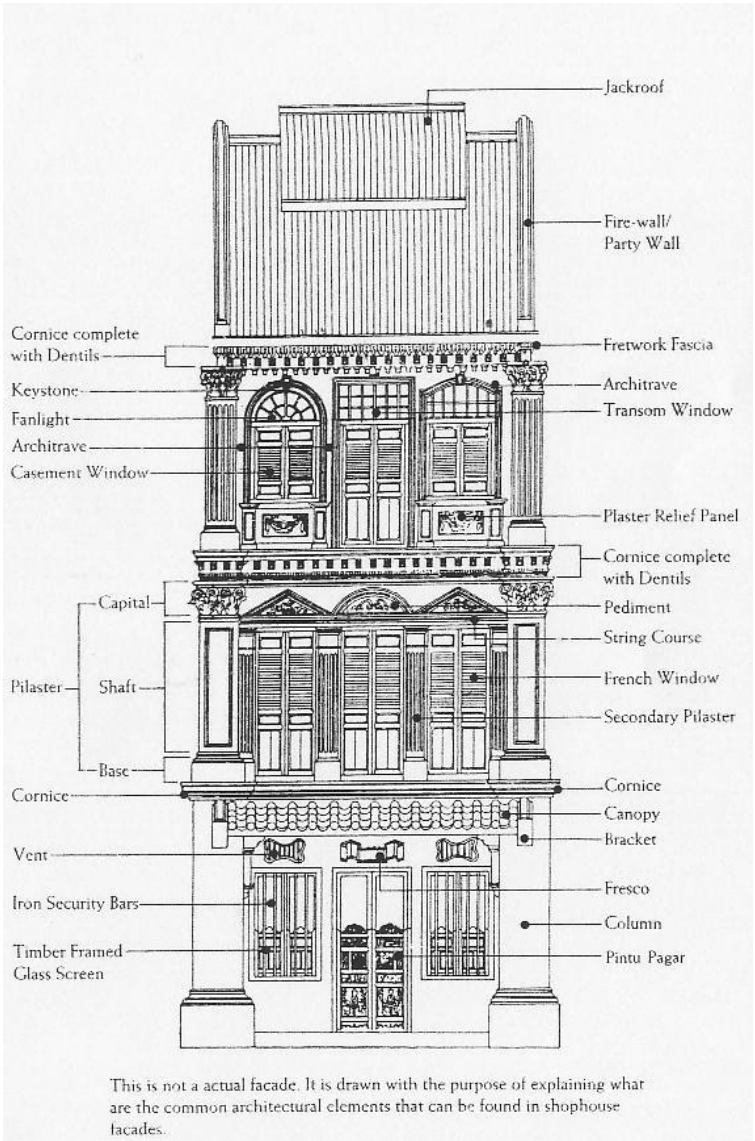
The lives of the Chinese immigrants greatly intertwined with the ubiquitous shophouse – from daily living to commercial activities such as trading and business were all conducted within the premise of the shophouse. Apart from residential-business functions, the shophouse is also utilized for other purposes, such as religion or worship (temple), communal or association (kongsi), educational or apprenticeship (school or guild) and many sorts. The Khoo Kongsi and the Cheah Kongsi in Penang are examples of kongsi shophouses.

During the 19th- and 20th-century British Straits Settlements and British Malaya, the thriving Chinese eventually rose to become comfortable middle class traders and shop owners (Vlatseas 91). Various types of small- or medium-sized businesses and commercial trades, ranging from sundry shopkeepers to specialized skills and professions, such as carpentry or tailoring, gradually emerged with the increase of shophouses which subsequently encouraged the growth of the towns. Shophouses were converted into all sorts of businesses, such as hotels, coffee shops, retail shops, offices, pawnshops, restaurants, clinics; even gambling houses, opium dens, brothels, prostitute dens, and death houses (Kew 68-69). These economic activities of the Chinese established the role of the Chinese shophouse in urban towns throughout Malaya.

EVOLUTION OF SHOPHOUSE FAÇADE

Shophouse Façade Features

For the purpose of this essay, a basic understanding of the shophouse façade's key built features is necessary. The Chinese constructed these built features to conform to the requirements and necessities of the prevailing social, political, economical and environmental conditions of a 19th -and 20th-century Malaya. The following are an architectural diagram (Figure 1) and brief descriptions of the shophouse façade's built features:



This is not a actual facade. It is drawn with the purpose of explaining what are the common architectural elements that can be found in shophouse facades.

Fig. 1. A diagram displaying key built features of a shophouse façade (not an actual type that exists) (URA Chinatown 95).

(a) *Upper and Lower Floors* – Linked by a staircase in the middle or side of the shop, the upper floor is utilized for residential while the lower floor for business and storage of goods, with no wall but wooden panel doors that open up to counters, displays and work areas facing the street.

(b) *Firewall* – Also 'gabled wall' or 'party wall'. A shared wall that 'usually extend above the roof at both sides of the building, connecting one building to another' and acts as structural barrier to prevent fire from spreading to the adjacent shophouses (Kohl 32). Originating from Southern Chinese village houses that shared party walls, gabled walls often appeared with a variety of contours that accentuate further the visual dominance of the roof (Kohl 172).

6 *Gabled roof* – A pitched roof which ends in an abrupt, flat wall (Kohl 198). At least two to four gabled roofs are constructed running the length of the shophouse (Kohl 147, 176). Originating from Southern China, the roof tiles are normally unglazed grey clay tiles arranged in an overlapping manner to cool the heated roof and reduce radiation, keeping the rooms below cool (URA Chinatown 37). The roof ridges are sometimes decorated with various animals made of fireclay (Kohl 147).

7 *Jack roof* – An additional roof on top of the main roof, or 'an elevated gabled or pyramidal roof segment, sheltering a clerestory opening which separates it from the main roof' (Kohl 200). A Chinese roof ventilation technique, it allows accumulated hot air in the house to escape (Chen 90).

8 *Shuttered (or louvred) windows* – Windows 'plain or louvred, are hinged onto a wooden framework so that the upper floor may be enclosed in a simple forthright manner' (Kohl 179). Louvred shutters are popular as they allow natural ventilation while affording privacy and security to the shop occupants (URA Chinatown 63). Sometimes they. These were later replaced by 'two or three equally sized window openings set into a masonry wall' with rectangular or half round shaped fanlights, or segmental arches (Kohl 148), known as French window or casement window with timber shutters, timber louvers or panels, revealing ornamented or carved timber or cast iron balustrades when opened (URA Chinatown 59).

9 *Ventilation openings* – Ventilation windows (or vents)—rarely square, usually framed in curvilinear symmetrical shapes—are found above the unglazed windows on both sides of the doorway at the lower floor. The shapes of the vents vary from square to curvilinear symmetrical shapes symbolic of the Chinese culture, and the later phase saw plastered relief ornamentation. Urban Redevelopment Authority Singapore states that 'vents are a significant design element and important to the overall architectural expression of any particular shophouse, their location and treatment should be respected' (URA Chinatown 65). Sometimes ventilation openings are found on the balcony protruding over the shop front (Kohl 149).

10 *Door* - Main entrance cum exit located at the ground floor of a shophouse which opened to both the interior and outdoors. Variations of doors include removable timber posts and boards, sliding timber screens, and *pintu pagars* ('half doors', or 'fence doors') (URA Chinatown 57). The double leaf timber

doors are the most common front entrance door, while the single leaf timber door is often found at the backlane opening or rear side of shophouses, particularly corner or end lots.
11 *Signage* – The concept of rows of two-storey Chinese shophouses built in close proximity and facing the street without any form of architectural display reflected those in Southern China (Kohl 174). The only thing that had visual appeal were pendant signboards seen hanging vertically or resting on stone bases outside the shop front. These signboards were 'often the pride of their owners', and were 'brilliantly painted, inscribed, or carved with characters that advertised the wares available in the shop or displaying a fictitious and flowery good luck slogan or family name, without any indication whatsoever of the shop's function' (Kohl 173). Sometimes even 'symbols are found displayed at the shop front to aid the illiterate in discerning the wares available' (Kohl 173). This method of advertising the Chinese shop's name and its trade or business was prevalent in Malaya then and still persists on until today, nowadays even with the addition of horizontal signage in various shapes, sizes and colours, enhancing the shophouse façade even more.

(i) *Surface Ornamentations* – Another most unique and distinctive feature of the Chinese shophouse in Malaya is its façade's surface ornamentations. The early shophouse's plainness or minimal façade was initially purely utilitarian and had no ornaments on the roofs, but only a small panel of decoration at the top of the gable eave, such as stucco or clay in Chinese motifs of birds or flowers in colourful paints (Kohl 147, 179). The transitional shophouse then employed Western Classical motifs such as festoons, pillars and pilasters in the Western Classical order, or Dutch-styled windows. Often this combination of foreign Western motifs and Chinese elements co-exist on the same façade, particularly the eclectic 'Chinese Baroque'[16] or 'Nyonya Baroque' style that emerged during early 20th century (Kohl 109).

Other significant built features of a shophouse (not included in the diagram) include:
2 *'Five-foot way'*[17] – A uniquely-designed open and continuous 'five-foot pathway' or 'pavement' located in front of the shophouse at ground level (Kohl 176). Imposed by the colonial British on all shophouses in Malaya and the Straits Settlements,[18] the five-foot way mainly served 'to shield traders or businessmen from the mid-day tropical sun and provided an extended shed from the rain'; 'to keep the pedestrians off the roadway' amidst the traffic of bullock carts, horse carriages and rickshaw coolies (Tate 14; Piyadasa, 'Stamford Raffles and the Chinese Shophouse Form'). Shopkeepers also took advantage of these shaded areas to display their products out front of the shop (Chen 91). Ismawi Bin Hj. Zen indicates another unique function of five-foot ways: Rooms that protruded above the five-foot way has a collapsible opening 'to enable the inhabitants living in the upper floor to check the identity of late-night callers or to enable the goods to be transported to the upper floor storage without having to go through the main shopping floor (ground floor)' (Ismawi 110).

3 *Airwell* – Also 'skywell' or 'lightwell', is a narrow sunken space located at the middle of the ground floor of a shophouse, opens to the sky, receives light and ventilation without the full heat of the sun, and provides a catchment area for rain water (Knapp 21-22). It is actually a reduced size of a courtyard concept integral in a Chinese domicile (Kohl 23) originated from Southern China.[19]

Shophouse Typology and Façade Ornamentation

The shophouse typology and façade evolved from one form to another over the course of time, due to a series of factors ranging from climate, fire hazards to government policies, as well as cultural influences from the Chinese immigrants, colonial Europeans, local Malays and other indigenous groups in Malaya (Kew 39; URA Chinatown 35). The shophouse later witnessed its façade replaced by popular

stylistic trends and modern technology; its built features transformed and its surface ornamentations complex and eclectic.

Although there are presently several chronological accounts of the shophouse typology from various sources, the categorisation by Kohl and Urban Redevelopment Authority Singapore are referred. This essay classifies the shophouse typology in Malaya into four main evolutionary phases according to specific periods: (1) Early Prototype: The Atap Shophouse (Pre 1880s); (2) The Early Shophouse (1840s-1880s); (3) The Transitional Shophouse (1880s-1900s); and (4) The Late Shophouse (1900s-1930s).

(1) Early Prototype: The Atap Shophouse (Pre 1880s)

The earliest dwelling structure of the early Chinese in Malaya during the 19th century was the single-storey wooden and atap houses and shophouses (Kohl 179). This wooden-atap structure is presumed to be an early prototype for the Chinese shophouse form that was to become popular in Malaya during the late 19th century.

This early shophouse prototype is believed to be a Chinese adaptation despite similar construction methods with the Malay house form[20], as Kohl points out two indicators of Chinese influence revealed by this single-storey wooden-atap shophouse: 1) It was built on ground or street level similar to those in Southern China, different from the Malay built structure of elevated levels on stilts or piles; 2) Its wooden posts supporting an atap roof is half-hipped and half-gabled, a form without precedence in Malay building practice (Kohl 178). There was no façade (or 'façade- less') and 'the wares are displayed on street-side counters' at the shop's open front as depicted in Isabella Bird's 1883 illustration of a row of Chinese shops built of wooden posts and atap roofs in old Kuala Kangsar (Kohl 178). A close resemblance of the early single-storey wooden shophouse exists along the East-West highway towards the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Figure 2).

(a) (b)

Fig. 2. Visual comparison: (a) This drawing by Bird in 1883 indicates a street scene in old Kuala Kangsar, Perak, with a row of single-storey wooden-atap Chinese shophouse (The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither (Bird, 1967), qtd. in Kohl 178); (b) Situated on the East-West highway towards the town of Bentong, a row of single- storey wooden shophouse (though no longeratap but zinc roofing) closely resembles the early single-storey wooden-atap shophouse before the 1880s (Photograph by author).

(2) The Early Shophouse (1840s-1880s)

The early (or 'utilitarian-style') shophouse succeeded the atap-thatched wooden and later brick

single-storey shophouse.[21] Despite the introduction of the early permanent two-storey brick shophouse[22]—due to the major fire-outbreak of the earlier wooden and atap roof shophouses in Penang in 1826—some early shophouses still remained its earlier wooden structure (Kohl 179) (Figure 3). These early two-storey shophouses existed in urban areas and by rivers that flowed through canals in a town, similar to the early two-storey Malaccan rowhouses formerly built on piles over the sea or river (Chen 92).

It was not until the building of two-storey shophouses during the mid-19th century that the façade became obvious; the shophouse form began to obtain a façade front which consists of more obvious frontal surface area. The upper floor of the shophouse—normally for residential purpose—started to acquire a façade with windows, pilasters, cornices and pediments which are 'compradoric' [23] features similar to the 'compradoric style' architecture in Southern China[24]; while the ground-level business shop front evolved into a wall façade with ventilation openings (windows), doorways, columns, brackets, and opening to a 'five-footway'. This shophouse form was purely utilitarian and hardly any ornamentation on its façade.

The 'first generation' of this early double-storey Chinese shophouses consists of a top floor which was shorter in height than the ground floor and has either one or two windows on the upper floor (Figure 4). It has a rectangular door and windows which are timber-framed with shutters of boards, panels or louvres. There are sometimes rectangular or circular vents between or above doors or windows, which are usually unfilled but lined with wire-mesh with large enough openings. Its cornices appeared somewhat heavy-looking and adopted the Tuscan and Doric orders, possibly a Palladian influence from the Anglo-Indian architecture built by the British in 19th century Malaya.[25] Ornamentation is minimal, reflecting the diasporic Chinese's 'non- conscious manifestation of habitual building practices carried forward into the new frontier' (URA Chinatown 81). As the Chinese gained better financial and social status, they began exploring different design expressions with the shophouse façade. Sometime later, there emerged the 'second generation' of this early shophouse in which both floors were of equal proportion and the top floor boosted three windows (Piyadasa, 'Stamford Raffles and the Chinese Shophouse Form') (Figure 5).

(a) (b)

Fig. 3. Visual comparison: (a) A row of earlier two -storey shophouses in Singapore with only one

window on the upper floor, built of timber and brick, probably before 1900s (Mialaret 62); (b) A two-storey early shophouse with wooden structure and one window on the upper floor presently still exists in Kangar (Photograph by author).

(a) 

(b) 

Fig. 4. Versions of the 'first generation' early shophouse (two-storey): (a) The upper floor of this shophouse in Alor Setar, displays four adjoining windows (eight panels) and louvred vents above them, while the lower floor only has a single arched door and window or vent, a façade rarely seen nowadays; (b) The upper floor of this shophouse in Klang, displays two window panels, while the lower floor shows a door, windows and vents (Photograph by author).

Fig. 5. The 'second generation' early shophouse (two-storey) in Bentong, displaying three rectangular windows divided equally the upper floor façade. Note the middle opened window panels revealing a carved balustrade of Malay influence, and a jack roof (Photograph by author).

(3) The Transitional Shophouse (1880s-1900s)

The transitional shophouse evolved from the early shophouse form, its two storeys generally built of brick with tiled roofs that replaced the earlier timber and thatch hut (Figure 6). In this first transitional phase, the entire shophouse façade and its double or triple windows began to acquire Palladian symmetry and ornamentation (Ismawi 115; Kohl 182). Commonly featured with two timber-framed and shuttered windows on the upper storey set into a masonry wall, the façade also displays a variety of shapes and ornaments on windows ranging from 'rectangles, semi-circles, Chinese petal design' and all degrees of segmental arched transom windows to completely round-headed fanlights, which are 'infilled with glass, cast iron or worked timber panels' (URA Chinatown 83). The openings are lined with stucco frames and hoods, which include not only windows and floor-length doors, but also vents in simple elegant squares or diamonds between windows. Ornamentation is used but restrained; and the use of modified Corinthian or Composite order is common (URA Chinatown 83). The transitional shophouse consists of a consistent floor and cornice height that visually establishes the row of houses as a unified block. Gable walls acting as 'fire walls' can be seen from this shophouse phase; however the corner building employs a hipped roof rather than a gable wall which covered the five-footway on street level (Kohl 182). A third storey was later added to the transitional shophouse (Figure 7).

Fig. 6. A two-storey transitional shophouse in Kuantan. Its upper floor façade displays three windows, each a semi-circle fanlight infilled with glass on top (Photograph by author).

Fig. 7. A three-storey transitional shophouse of a later period in Ipoh displays three rectangular louvred windows on its second and third floors façades (Photograph by author).

The later period of the transitional Chinese shophouse became more eclectic and hybrid in form when popular European revivalist styles—such as Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Palladian, Neo-Classical, Neo-Gothic, Dutch Patrician and others—arrived in Malaya by the 1920s (Chen 90-91, Lee 59-60) (Figures 8—9). Stylistic European features included the arched fanlights, carved pilasters, triangular-shaped pediments, gabled frieze of plaster carvings or tiles decorations, stucco and plastered cornices or architrave, rusticated doorways or window patterns (Kohl 58-59). Fusing together Western and Chinese ornamentations and sometimes Malay elements, the end result was an eclectic and bizarre façade 'masterpiece', thus the term 'Straits Eclectic' was coined for this type of eclectic architecture.

Fig. 8. A two-storey Neo-Classical style shophouse in Seremban (Photograph by author).

Fig. 9. A two-storey shophouse reflecting the Neo-Gothic style syncretised with Chinese elements and wordings in Malacca (Photograph by author).

(4) The Late Shophouse (1900s-1930s)

Of the shophouse styles in Malaya, the late shophouse that emerged during the 1900s is perhaps the most distinctive phase and considered the evolutionary peak due to its magnificent façade ornamentation. Between the 1910s and 1930s, the plain wooden shutters of the 1880s and 1890s were replaced by ornate window frames with Roman and Greek columns and pediments (Khoo 136). Usually tripartite, the windows are stretched from side to side across the elevation of the upper floor taking up the maximum façade wall space. The columns or pilasters that frame the windows also replaced the façade 'wall' surface, leading to its 'disappearance' when the windows are opened fully and allowing maximum ventilation (URA Chinatown 85) (Figure 10). The highest culmination of the late shophouse façade—known as the 'Chinese Baroque'—displays an eclectic mix of stylistic symbols believed by the Chinese to bring good luck, fortune and prosperity (such as dragons, phoenixes, bats, unicorns, birds and flowers) intertwined with Western Classical ornamentations believed to represent grandeur, status and power (such as festoons, Palladian pillars and pilasters in the Classical orders), at times mixed with localised Malay elements (Figure 11). These are represented as decorative motifs embedded on stucco-finished walls, decorative tiles (polychromatic ceramic tile panels), glazed roof filings, plastered

mouldings, and chipped glazed ceramic decoration (or *jian nian*[26]). Popular among the wealthy Chinese and Babas, themselves an assimilated and hybrid community of Chinese and Malay antecedents, the 'Chinese Baroque' style was an endeavour that surpassed any architectural or artistic attempts of that time.

Fig. 10. A two-storey late shophouse with three windows on the upper floor in Ipoh. Note the Western Palladian pillars and pilasters—adorned with ornamentations—replaced the façade 'wall' surface yet the lower floor façade looks very 'Chinese-y' (Photograph by author).

(a)

(b)

Fig. 11. (a) A 'Chinese Baroque' style shophouse in Malacca displays an eclectic façade of cultural or symbolic ornamentations reflecting Chinese, European and Malay influences; (b) Close up of its eclectic upper façade ornamentations. Note the Chinese canopy and bracket; Classical floral motifs, festoons, pilasters, cornices and windows; and Malay fretwork fascia eaves (Photograph by author).

The evolution of the Chinese shophouse reached its peak in the 1920s during the rubber boom but slowed down during the 1930s depression up until World War II, witnessing a decline in the two- and three-storey shophouses as a popular object of functional architecture (Chen 91, Kohl 184). The arrival of the 'Modernist Movement'[27] spawned the Art Deco style[28] reflecting the new commercial development at that time, marking the start of a new form of aesthetics and trend in the modernizing process of Malaya. This style became popular and was applied onto the shophouse façades in Malaya during the 1920s and 1930s.

The subsequent stylistic trend that took over the architectural scene and changed the urban landscape of Malaya was the austere, pure form of the 'International Style'[29] prevalent in the 1950s, signaling an end to the earlier Chinese shophouse forms (Chen 102, Piyadasa, 'The "Modernist Movement" Arrives'). From the 1930s onwards, reinforced concrete and structural steel high-rise buildings and multi-storied blocks began to mushroom, replacing the role of the earlier Chinese shophouses (Kohl 184). This phenomenon inevitably marked an end to the almost five decades of Chinese shophouse evolution in the architectural history of Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Over a period spanning more than fifty years between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Malaya witnessed the evolutionary journey of the Chinese shophouse transforming from one form to another. The Chinese shophouse has evolved from its early prototype of a single-storey wooden-atap 'façade-less' shophouse to a two or more storeys brick-and-tiled shophouse with plain or minimal façade and ultimately a sophisticated and highly eclectic façade—particularly the Straits Chinese which the Chinese was greatly acclaimed for. This fervor approach of ornamentation and decoration on the façade of shophouses and houses is seen as the last of the glorious attempts by the Chinese builders and artisans in our country's architectural history.

No longer merely an importation from Southern China, the Chinese shophouse in Malaya — among other Chinese built forms—is a physical testimonial of the Chinese people adapting and assimilating with local vernacular conditions and foreign influences, a manifestation of their diasporic culture that not only asserted their maternal culture, but also embraced the notion of hybridity and eclecticism in a multi-ethnic and pluralistic milieu. The advent of European colonial powers in Malaya, particularly the British that imported popular European Classical revivalist styles and provided the Chinese builders a 'copybook' or source of reference undeniably had had its influence and effect, however, the end result was rather insignificant[30] (Chen 47) as witnessed in the Chinese shophouses in Malaya.

At present, clusters of Chinese shophouses that formed towns and cities still make up the major parts of the Malaysian urban fabric, despite modern skyscrapers and multi- storey steel and concrete structures. The Chinese shophouses existing within the commercial centres of local towns and cities presently still assumes a significant role in the shaping of economic, cultural, social and political aspects of the country at large. Lower- and middle-class Chinese still depended on these shophouses for their livelihoods, be it traditional or modern businesses or trades. Despite the shophouse's continuous role in the society, it is no longer regarded as important nowadays ever since the advent of modernity and introduction of high rise buildings. Throughout the country, the situation has now become critical: These old
shophouses, if not refurbished or modified with awkward façade designs, are hardly maintained at all. Even worse, many of these old shophouses are left abandoned, defaced, and destroyed by parties that do not heed its value or due to selfish pursuits.

Despite conservation efforts from several historical or heritage authorities and local concerned communities, their efforts alone are insufficient to ensure the continuity of this unique cultural and built heritage in Malaysia. It is the common people like us and our younger generations, regardless of race or religion, who ought to put our hearts together to conserve the shophouse. The shophouse no longer

represents only the Chinese; but other ethnic communities in Malaysia as well particularly those who have depended on the shophouse in one way or another. Hence, prompt remedial actions for the conservation of our shophouses are crucial, or else this valuable piece of our nation's multi-cultural heritage may be lost forever.

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[10] The reference of the term 'Chinese shophouse' (or 'shophouse' in short) in this context exclude the shophouses built and occupied by other immigrant races, such as the Indians and Arabs.

[11] 'Façade' refers to 'the exterior face of a building which is the architectural front, sometimes distinguished from the other aspects by elaboration of architectural and ornamental details' or 'the principal front of a building that faces on to a street or open space'. "façade." *British & World English Dictionary, Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press, 2013. 24 Oct. 2013. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/facade?q=facade>

[13] 'Diaspora' means 'to disperse' in Greek. Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonisation. Colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans over the entire world (Ashcroft et al. 68-69).

[14] China has always been referred to as the ancestral homeland of the overseas Chinese communities in the Southeast Asian regions. A traditional reference to demarcation between China proper (inland) and the periphery (coastal) existed then (Pan 20-21). The overseas or immigrant Chinese originated from the poorer 'barbarians' and less developed peripheral (or 'outskirts') southern coasts of China, unlike the more 'civilized and cultured' Han Chinese from the core central and northern regions of Imperial China. Besides its diversified territories and geographical demarcation, China was also demarcated via aspects of conceptual, ethnic and language (Pan 20-21).

[15] To the Chinese, *Nanyang* means the 'Southern Ocean' or 'Southern Seas', referring to Southeast Asia. This term was originally coined for regions immediately to the south of China, which included the Philippines, Dutch East Indies, Malaya and Borneo, Siam, Indochina, Burma, and sometimes even Ceylon and India. But in today's version, it refers to Chinese who had settled in Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Indonesia – places reached by sea, specifically the South China Sea (Pan 16).

[16] Derived from an anachronistic concept of the dominant Malay race, 'Malay Archipelago' is the largest group of islands in the world, consisting of approximately 25,000 islands in total. It originally refers to the islands situated between mainland Southeastern Asia and Australia, including Sumatra, Java, Borneo, the Philippines, and New Guinea. "Malay Archipelago." *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 05 Jan. 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/359679/Malay-Archipelago>.

[17] Historical records show the earliest Chinese presence in Malaya marked by pilgrimages, official envoys and trading voyages between China and the Malay Peninsula as early as the 2nd century, owing to the Malay Peninsula's strategic geographical location situated halfway on the sea route between two large centers of civilizations (India and China) and at the cross-roads of seasonal monsoon winds (Vlatseas 2). The early Chinese that came were mostly sojourners who only stayed temporarily, while other Chinese traders that came to Malacca during the late 14th century settled down by marrying local Malay womenfolk, producing a mixed offspring known as the *Peranakan*, or *Baba* (Khoo 18, 23).

[18] ~~The Chinese sinkehs or 'newcomers' were a group out of mainstream Chinese culture, con~~sisting adult males from labouring classes of fishermen, farmers, artisans, craftsmen, and coolies (Kohl 14).

[19] 'Coolies' are unskilled people from China and India employed as indentured labourers particularly during the colonial European 'coolie trade' in the 19th and 20th centuries. Coolies are mostly voluntary labourers paid with wages and freed after serving out their contracts. "coolie." *Singapore Infopedia.* National Library of Singapore, 2014. Web. 05 Jan. 2014. <http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_87_2004-12-15.html> Coolies were poor thus had to 'sell' themselves to the ship captains for a passageway to the Nanyang, after which they were 'sold' again to Chinese merchants, miners and contractors upon disembarkation (Sidhu 492).

[20] Five major speech (or dialect) groups—Hokkien, Teochiu, Cantonese, Hakka (Khek) and Hainanese (or Hailam)—from the four peripheral Southern Chinese provinces make up the majority of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian regions (Pan 24). Despite provincial differences, these diasporic Chinese shared common aspirations and goals: making fortune and returning home with dignity and pride.

[21] *Kongsi* is a clan association which also has business interests, and may be a company (Kohl 14). It is a place for filial obligatory ancestral worshipping by the Chinese, hold festivals and secret initiatory rites, as well as being a secret society led by a president or 'Elder Brother' (or *Tai Ko*). The kongsi housed many Chinese members sworn in by oaths before a peculiar deity (or *tokong*) (Kohl 15).

[22] For example, the Cantonese and Hakka from Guangdong were mainly miners and artisans; the Teochiu from Swatow were farmers, shopkeepers and boatmen (Ryan 77).

[23] *Kapitan* (or *Kapitan Cina*) refers to an appointed leader of the Chinese community in each settlement in Malaya (Kohl 192).

[24] *Atap,* a Malay term that means 'thatch', is a jungle produce that was the most readily available material in tropical rainforests such as in the Malay Peninsula; it was cheap, free, lightweight, easily worked, and provided ventilation and protection from rain (Kohl 70).

[25] *Feng shui*, literally 'wind and water' in the Chinese language, is a combination of mystical beliefs, astrology, folklore and common sense practiced by people in China since some 4,000 years ago (Chen 48). *Feng shui* uses symbolic representations of animals, people and plants motifs in sculptural form to signify orientation and good luck, as well as to ward off evil spirits. This trait is applied in locating the perfect orientation of a house, and respecting aspects of its earth and water environment is considered essential for success and good fortune[15] (Chen 136).

[16] The hybrid Straits Eclectic style was the most interesting and unique phase, variously described as 'Straits Chinese Eclectic', 'Palladian Chinese' (or 'Sino-Malay-Palladian'), 'Chinese Baroque', or '*Towkay* Italianate' (Piyadasa, 'Impact of Nyonya Baroque on Shophouse Form'). Other variation of terms such as 'Sino-Malay-Colonial' and 'Tropical Renaissance' were also named (Khoo 133).

[17] Lim states that 'five-foot way' is a colloquial Anglo-Asian expression made up of two parts: 'five-foot', a literal translation from the Malay and Hokkien terms *kaki lima* or *goh kaki*; and 'way', a simplified version of the term 'footways'. Lim suggests the term 'five-foot way' was most likely coined by local builders whom had observed the minimum five-foot width of a verandah for shophouses (Lim, 'The "Shophouse Rafflesia"' 48).

[18] The five-foot way concept was first imposed by Sir Stamford Raffles in Singapore in 1822 'for the sake of regularity and conformity', later introducing to other Malayan towns (URA Chinatown 35).

[19] In compact two-storey dwellings of Southern China, courtyards are not a feature, largely due to the scarcity of land. Rather, the airwell punctures the dwelling, providing open shafts to capture ambient breezes and let light penetrate into the dwelling (Knapp 21-23).

[20] The construction of a basic Malay house form encompasses a steeply-pitched roof with over-handing eaves that shelter from sun and rain; slatted floors with gaps providing ventilation and cleanliness; built on piles that created a height and distance standing against flood waters and wild animals. Construction materials are readily available jungle produce, such as atap, bamboo, *nibung* palm, rattan and bark (Kohl 47).

[21] Kohl indicates the earliest Chinese shophouse structure was built of timber wood and atap roof, but the structure had switched to using brick and overlaid with stucco, by mid-1820s, despite the roof was still made of atap. Later tile roofing became more readily available and affordable for the Chinese that eventually it replaced the atap roofs of the Chinese shophouse (Kohl 77).

[22] Sir Stamford Raffles of the British East India Company had observed this problem in which he imposed new rules with regard to the use of more non-combustible building materials during the town planning processes for Singapore (Piyadasa, 'Stamford Raffles and the Chinese Shophouse Form').

[23] 'Compradoric Style' refers to Southern Chinese architecture with European influence. Emperor Ch'ien Lung had encouraged architecture of various styles which included Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim, and Italian structures, as well as collaborations with the Jesuits. This resulted in structures depicting 'semirococco European style mixed with Chinese motifs' (Kohl 43).

[24] According to Kohl, the 'Compradoric Style' architecture—'a superimposed European-initiated style'—emerged in the 'Treaty Ports' in Southern China through which they passed on their Nanyang voyages during the late 19th century (Kohl 20).

[25] The 'Palladian'—named after the Italian architect Andrea Palladio (1508-80)—influence was a classical revival movement in English architecture from the 16th to 19th centuries. Palladian architecture emphasized 'symmetrical planning, harmonic proportions, and the splendour of Greek and Roman motifs' (Kohl 56-57), and stressed on ornamentation more than structure, 'provided for the standard parts of the classical orders for doorways, windows, façades, as well as for the relationship of buildings from one to another' (Kohl 58). The British-built Anglo-Indian architectural style was popular in Malaya during the British rule, therefore provided an architectural reference for the local Chinese in their building of shophouses and terrace houses (Kohl 56).

[26] *Jian nian*, a Chinese term that literally means 'cut and glue', is defined by Kohl 'a mosaic-like technique used in Minnan style ornamentation to attach broken shards and pieces of glazed pottery into a matrix of cement or other ground' (Kohl 200).

[27] The 'Modernist Movement' (or 'Modernism') is the deliberate departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression that distinguish many styles in the arts and literature of the 20th century. "modernism." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.* 2003. Houghton Mifflin Company 05 Jan. 2014 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/modernism>

[28] 'Art Deco' refers to a style of applied decoration made fashionable in the late 1920s in Europe and America (Chen 100). Its inventive and playful nature was a departure from the Neo-classical style of

government and institutional buildings of the time, creating a different building idiom (Chen 101).

[29] 'International Style' is an architectural style during the early 20th century where the building of public structures are 'characterized by asymmetrical composition, large windows, cubistic façades, an absence of mouldings, and the use of structural steel skeletons' (Kohl 200).

[30] In my opinion, the Portuguese and Dutch did not have the earlier intentions to colonise the Malay Peninsula but was aimed solely at monopoly of trade and spreading of religion. In addition, most Portuguese buildings in Malacca were destroyed during the Dutch siege of Malacca in 1641, thus hardly any Portuguese architecture was left to provide the localised Chinese builders a source of reference for design on buildings. The Dutch, too, built very little buildings during their rule.